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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BARCELONA 000087

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/WE (SAMSON/CERVETTI)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SP](#)

SUBJECT: HIGH SPEED TRAIN HITS BUMP; THREATENS SOCIALISTS

REF: BARCELONA 76

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1. (SBU) Summary: PM Jose Luis Zapatero acknowledged October 28 that the arrival of the AVE to Barcelona, which he had repeatedly confirmed would happen by December 21, will not be finished before the March 2008 general elections. Safety concerns, poor management, and ill-advised political considerations have conspired against the project. The PM's announcement has already damaged his credibility in a region he must win to hold on to power. While the Socialists may not be in imminent danger at the moment, the alarms are sounding. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Barcelona's summer of discontent has carried over into the fall. In the last three weeks, three local train lines have been closed in Barcelona as a result of recurring landslides during the construction of the AVE high speed rail lines. Critics charge the contractor, OHL, has cut corners on safety in order to meet the December 21 deadline set by politicians. The Catalan government (Generalitat) requested the cancellation of OHL's contract - a request PM Jose Luis Zapatero's government denied - citing administrative concerns.

3. (SBU) Critics also claim construction caused repeated landslides including a platform collapse at the Bellvitge station. Local train service was recently suspended for several weeks as a result of construction mishaps causing increased traffic and inconvenience for commuters in Barcelona. Since the beginning of the AVE project approximately 12 workers have been killed by construction accidents. The most recent death was on October 15th when an AVE worker was killed by a machine that hit him on the head during construction at the L'Hospitalet de Llobregat station. Suspended train service has been replaced by inconvenient, crowded, and slow bus service leading to public outcry. The Barcelona City Hall has demanded that construction slow so that safety measures are not further compromised. Zapatero acknowledged this will delay construction well beyond the December 21 deadline.

4. (SBU) Unexpectedly and purposely under the radar, Zapatero and regional president Jose Manuel Montilla toured the AVE construction sites October 28 in Barcelona. Zapatero admitted there had been problems with the construction and assumed responsibility for it, but stopped short of firing Development minister Magdalena Alvarez, who is responsible for the project. Alvarez later defiantly announced that she had no intention of resigning. Zapatero pledged he would now personally oversee AVE construction in Barcelona. The PM's visit was marked by one of several mudslides many believe are caused by the project, and

prompted both Zapatero and Montilla to support efforts to make the areas safer before reopening local lines, which have been shut down due to the construction.

15. (SBU) Regional party leaders almost universally lambasted the PM's visit and comments afterwards. Convergence and Union (CiU) and Popular Party (PP) leaders joined their rival, and members of the Catalan tripartite government, Republicans (ERC), and ex-Communists (ICV) to complain about poor management of the project and call for the minister Alvarez' resignation. CiU leader Artur Mas suggested Zapatero should have visited the construction sites and traffic congestion on a week day instead of a Sunday so that he could get a real image of the problem. ERC leader Joan Puigcercos stated that while Zapatero's visit was appreciated, he believes that Catalunya needs to have more control over its Public Works. Daniel Sirera (PP) stated that it was shameful for Zapatero to visit the works secretly and by surprise. ICV leader Joan Herrera criticized Zapatero for coming to the construction site only to deafen the ears to the petition to fire Magdalena Alvarez.

16. (SBU) As expected, only PSC remained relatively mute on the topic. However, VP Pedro Solbes (PSOE) expressed confidence that the PM and his team would get the job done.

17. (SBU) Comment: The March general elections are moving forward faster than the high speed train. Zapatero's once vaunted strength in Catalunya - a region he must win if there is any chance for him to hold onto power - is being sapped. According to an October 22 opinion poll by leading daily, La Vanguardia, Catalans' support for the PM's policies towards the region has dropped 23 points (from 60% in July 2006 to 37% in October 2007). Although he still enjoys a healthy lead, his support in Catalonia is slowly being confined to Socialist members unlike in past years when his support was much more broad and across regional parties. In any event, the majority of people living in Catalonia have more trust in Zapatero (73%) than in Rajoy (13%) although Zapatero's confidence rating dropped eight points. In an effort to bolster his credentials, PP president Mariano Rajoy sent the mayor of Madrid, who

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previously dealt with a bad traffic problem there, to Barcelona to see what has been occurring with the AVE construction. While most are far from calling Catalunya a lost cause for the Socialists, it is clear much work needs to be done here to shore up support and win back trust. End comment.
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